Apollinaris Syncletica

(d. 420/470)

BRIEFING

Apollinaris Syncletica (Medieval Greek: Απολινάριος Συγκλητική), also known as Apollinaria of Egypt, was a saint and hermit of the 5th century, venerated in the Eastern Orthodox Church and Roman Catholic Church. Her story is most likely apocryphal and "turns on the familiar theme of a girl putting on male attire and living for many years undiscovered".

HAGIOGRAPHY

Life of Saint Apolinaria

The Life of Saint Apolinaria (Greek: Βιος της μακαριας Απολεναριας, romanized: Bios tes makarias Apolenarias) is a legendary Greek saint's life. It is about Apolinaria, a transvestite virgin girl living as a monk in the desert of Scetis in Egypt. It is the Greek counterpart to the Coptic Legend of Hilaria.

Apolinaria's feast day, according to the Acta Sanctorum, is January 1.

Synopsis

Apolinaria was a daughter of Anthemius, called "emperor" in the Life, but actually only praetorian prefect in the early 5th century. She had a sister who was "possessed" by "an unclean spirit". She refused to accept an arranged marriage. Relenting to her demands, her parents hired nuns "to teach her the Psalms and how to read". Eventually, they gave her an escort and sent her with much wealth to visit the Holy Places.

Apolinaria first sailed to Ashkelon, where she visited churches and dispensed alms. She dismissed some of her escort and went on with the rest to the Jordan and Jerusalem, dispensing alms along the way. She dismissed more of her servants and returned to Ashkelon, where she took ship to Alexandria to visit the shrine of Saint Menas. In Alexandria, she secretly purchased a monastic habit and dismissed the rest of her escort, taking as her companions only an old man and a eunuch.

In Alexandria, she hired a covered litter to take her to pay her respects to the monks of Scetis. When it stopped at a place that later came to be called the Spring of Apolinaria, she pulled aside the curtain and found the men asleep. She changed into her monk's clothes and went into the marsh, where she lived off dates. The eunuch and litter-bearer awoke to find only her clothes. Her disappearance was relayed to the emperor, whereupon even the Senate wept.

Apolinaria lived in the marsh for several years "contending with the devil". Her skin became "like the shell of a tortoise and she became food for the gnats". In a vision, Christ told her to leave the marsh and take the masculine name Dorotheos. On the road she met Makarios, who took her for a eunuch and gave her a cell in his monastic community, where she practised basket weaving. Although she resisted the devil's nightly temptations, a demon took possession of her sister as a means of getting to her.

The emperor sent his possessed daughter to Scetis to be cured. Makarios entrusted her to Dorotheos, who exorcised the demon. Back in Constantinople, the devil causes the sister to appear pregnant and to believe that she was impregnated by the monk who exorcised her demon. The emperor sent men to destroy the monastery, but they merely took Dorotheos back to Constantinople. In a private audience with the emperor and empress, she proved that she was a woman by exposing her breasts and revealed her true identity. She then healed her sister's false pregnancy.

Apolinaria remained in Constantinople some days before returning to Scetis. Only a few days after her return, as she lay dying, she asked Makarios not to let the monks prepare her body for burial. Nonetheless, they washed her body anyway and discovered that she was a woman. Her name and her life were subsequently revealed to Makarios in a vision. She was buried in the cave of Makarios.

Textual history

The Life of Saint Apolinaria is one of several fictional saint's lives that "may have been mass-produced by a school of Egyptian scribes at a time when the desert of Scetis had become the acknowledged center of the monastic movement." Besides Apolinaria and Hilaria, other transvestite female saints reportedly living in Scetis in the 5th or 6th centuries include Anastasia, Athanasia, Euphrosyne, Matrona of Perge and Theodora. Their lives may be said to form a literary cycle.

The earliest copies of the Greek text are in the manuscript Cod. Vat. Gr. 819 of the Vatican Library, which dates to the 11th or 12th century, and in an 11th-century manuscript on Lesbos. A 15th-century copy is found in Cod. Barocc. 148 of the Bodleian Library. In the 17th century, the Bollandists made a copy of Cod. Vat. Gr. 819, now manuscript 8229 in the Royal Library of Belgium. A Latin translation made from Cod. Vat. Gr. 819 was published by Luigi Lippomano (1550s) and Laurentius Surius (1570s). It was included in the Patrologia Graeca because the Greek text could not be found. The Latin text uses the name Apollinaris throughout. The Greek text was first published by James Drescher, but with the last part of the text missing. Anthony Alcock has translated it into English.

Analysis

The legend of Apollinaris Syncletica was likely based on those of Syncletica of Alexandria and Theodora of Alexandria, two of the Desert Mothers. Although Apollinaris Syncletica was listed as a saint in the Roman Martyrology, her story, set in late antiquity, is most likely apocryphal, and has been called "a pious fiction", "so much like a romance", and "a religious romance".

Her namesake Syncletica of Alexandria is the subject of the Vita S. Syncleticæ, a Greek hagiography purportedly by Athanasius of Alexandria (d. 373) but not in fact written before 450. She then appears as amma Syncletica, an anchorite whose sayings are included in the Apophthegmata Patrum, compiled c.480–500. The legend of Theodora of Alexandria, like that of Apollinaris Syncletica, involves a holy woman and ascetic living as a male monk.

The 10th century Byzantine hagiographer Symeon the Metaphrast stated that Apollinaris was the daughter of the emperor Anthemius, but it is more likely that her father was a consular prefect in Constantinople. It is probable that both the hagiographic association with the emperor of the Western Empire and her connection with Macarius of Alexandria (d. 390) were added to her story to enhance her spiritual authority.

LIFE

Early life

According to the tale, Apollinaris' parents wanted her to marry a wealthy man at a young age, but she refused and persuaded them into allowing her to remain unmarried. She wanted to "retire completely from the world", like the Egyptian recluses she admired.

Religious life

Her parents permitted her to take a pilgrimage to Jerusalem, where she freed and dismissed all the slaves that accompanied her, except for an elderly man and a eunuch to prepare her tent, and bribed an old woman to procure a habit for her. On her way back home, while visiting the Egyptian coast, she escaped her companions, "assumed the monastic habit, and cast aside her worldly dress, with all its ornaments". She fled into the desert, but her companions could not find her, even after eliciting the assistance of a local governor. Her parents, when told of what happened, assumed that Apollinaris had entered a community of religious women.

Apollinaris made her way to Wadi El Natrun, a desert valley in the Nitrian Desert west of the Nile Delta, where she joined a large monastery of recluses living in caves and cells, run by Macarius of Alexandria. She was able to disguise herself as a man and assumed the name Dorotheus. Her sister had, in the meantime, become possessed by a demon, so her parents sent her to Macarius, who was famous for healing. Macarius, "moved by some interior impulse", insisted that Dorotheus heal the girl. When the girl was restored, she was returned to her parents, but she became ill again and her parents assumed that she had become pregnant. The girl accused Dorotheus of seducing her, so they demanded that Dorotheus be brought to them so he could answer the charge, and Apollinaris revealed herself to them as their daughter. She spent a few days with them and returned to the desert, where she remained for the rest of her life.

DEATH AND LEGACY

Apollinaris' gender was not discovered by her fellow hermits until her death in 420 or 470. The hagiographer Alban Butler said, about her story, that "it turns on the familiar theme of a girl putting on male attire and living for many years undiscovered". The Roman Catholic Church celebrates her feast day on 4 January; the Eastern Orthodox Church celebrates it on 5 January. Syncletica's name was removed from the Roman calendar of saints in 2001.